

Luke 12:49-53(54-56) A Blessed Division

The Word of the Lord from Luke 12: Jesus said, "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. A Divisive Savior

Jesus comes to bring division. Not peace, but division. I remember attending church during college with a friend of mine who didn't believe that the Bible was fully God's Word. This was the Gospel lesson for the day; and after the service, he used this text to challenge me: if the Bible is God's Word, how does this fit in with the message of peace and love and forgiveness? Jesus dividing families against each other? Jesus ending family peace? I still remember him distinctly asking, "What do you do with that?"

I didn't know what to say at the time. It sounded terribly out of step with the Gospel. But it is not. This is a blessed division indeed.

Consider the world apart from Jesus: Sinful. Unrighteous. Dead. Enslaved to sin. Apart from Christ, there are no exceptions. Before the fall into sin, mankind—all two of them—were united with God, holy and in His presence; but sin divided them away from God and death divided them away from life. All faced God's judgment. In other words, all were united, together—it's just that they were united in sin, death and condemnation. Make no mistake, those who are dead in sin are hostile to God. The hostility may be passive or aggressive in nature, but it is there.

Jesus came to save us from sin. That is why He became flesh. That is why He lived a perfectly holy life. That is why He submitted Himself to endure His death on a cross. That is why He rose again three days later and ascended into heaven. All of this was for you and for all the world—to open the gates of heaven once more, that "whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Jesus came to restore communion with God, to bring you back into the presence and light of your Creator. However, this grace is—by definition—a gift. He offers it to all by means of His Word, but He forces it upon nobody. Not everyone will hold onto the gift of life He gives: many in their sinfulness will reject it, throw it away. There will be those who repent and those who do not. There will be believers and unbelievers. There will be the living dead and those who live though they have died. That is the division that Jesus brings, that Jesus gives.

It is a blessed division. Apart from Christ, all would be lost. Because of Christ, many are saved. We are rightly troubled at the news of a disaster—a plane crash or a terrorist attack where many are killed. But we also give thanks for those who survive, for those who are divided from the dead by still being alive. We give thanks for the work of medics who save many on the battlefield and the triage nurses who go to disaster areas: for even though they cannot save all who are injured, they save some. Likewise, we give thanks for this division Jesus brings: we rejoice that while not all are saved, many are—solely by the grace of God.

Furthermore, we rejoice that the Lord doesn't limit His atoning grace: He does not divide out some and say to the rest, "I desire that the rest of you be divided and lost, separated from Me in hell forever." He desires **all** to be saved. He delights in the death of no one. He wants all to be united in Him!. Those who remain divided from Him do so by their own sinful rejection.

That's the division that Jesus brings, rather than the superficial, fake peace of death in sin. To quote this verse by itself and determine Jesus to be spiteful or mean is completely to miss the point of the verse. In fact, we must read it in the context of the verses which precede it. Jesus says, "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!" Fire destroys whatever it can burn away. It also purifies what it cannot. Jesus says that He has come to cast fire on the earth. He has come to destroy the power of sin, death, devil and hell. He has come to destroy all that would divide you from the Lord and the life that He has for you. But because you have faith, His fire does not destroy you. It purifies you. It purifies you by removing all of your impurities, all of your sins, all of your unholiness that would divide you from God.

But how does Jesus cast this fire on the earth? It is by His baptism that He must undergo. This is not the one in the Jordan River at the beginning of His ministry, although the two are closely connected. At His baptism in the Jordan, the sinless, pure Son of God took His place among sinners. By His baptism, He declared that He had come to bear all of their sins, all of their impurities, all of their unrighteousness to the cross. On the cross, He would take their place and suffer God's fire, God's judgment for sin: that's the baptism of fire that He speaks about in this text.

See, if you faced God's fire on your own, it would destroy and purify—but there would be nothing left, because there is nothing pure within you. So Christ has faced that fire in your place, been destroyed in your place, suffered hell in your place before His death and resurrection. Because the fire destroyed Him on the cross, now He purifies you. He divides you away from sin and death, sets you apart as a holy child of God.

So let no one read Jesus' words that He has come to give division and conclude that He is gleefully causing problems. He is dividing people from death to life at the cost of His own blood, at the price of His own life. Our salvation comes because of His distress.

II. Applications

What does this blessed division mean for you and me? For you as a Christian, the encompassing temptation is this: when division arises, it's the Gospel that gets the blame.

It doesn't make sense to blame the Gospel: picture the aftermath of a shipwreck with survivors flailing around in the water trying to escape drowning. A rescue ship has arrived on scene, with rescuers pulling survivors aboard so that they're safe: the rescuers are dividing the drowning from death to life. But instead of rejoicing to join those on board ship, imagine some in the water scream that it's wrong that those on board are different. Imagine them declaring that the rescue ship should be scuttled so that everyone is united in sinking once again.

That's the position in which the Church finds itself today, and always, in the world. You're safe aboard the ark of the Church, saved by Christ from death to life. As the Church, we proclaim that there's plenty of room on board; but the world will declare that Christianity is divisive for proclaiming life in Christ.

"Jesus Christ is Lord" is a statement that divides between those who believe it and those who do not, and there will always be pressure exerted on the Church to change that confession to something like "Jesus is one lord among many." But that says that every false god is as worthy of honor as Jesus. That leaves everyone without hope, united in hopelessness: everyone's sinking, and there's no true Savior to rescue. No, it's far better to rejoice in the dividing Savior, to declare, "Jesus is the one true Lord and Savior—and He has died to save you, too!"

A worship service creates division. Everyone is invited and all are welcome to attend, but a worship service is designed foremost to feed the people of God. It is the family meal, where the Lord feeds His beloved children. Some will visit a worship service and not like what they hear—I'm not so much speaking of style as I am of content. Apart from faith, people will not like the Gospel. This creates a division—some believe the Gospel and some do not. Now, a lot of "worship theory" these days says that a worship service is primarily to attract unbelievers who may or may not come, not the family of God in that place; and those who hold this view say that the proclamation of the Gospel should be minimized so as not to offend. Within the past few years, one Lutheran professor even suggested that we edit or omit the Apostles' Creed so as not to offend any Muslims who might be visiting! But if we take such a view, we are saying that the Gospel is the problem, not the false beliefs that others hold. We are saying that we value a superficial peace that says "Christianity isn't all that different," rather than boldly proclaiming Jesus who seeks to divide them from death. So we do well to examine ourselves: if visitors find us distasteful because we are boorish or unfriendly, that is our problem and a reason for repentance. But if they do not like the Gospel that they hear, we do not blame Jesus or the message. Instead, we give thanks that they were here to hear that Word, and that the Holy Spirit will continue to work by the Word they have heard to divide them from death to life. And we proclaim to all who will hear that there's more room aboard the ship, that Jesus will not run out of grace for all who will believe, that He wants to divide them away from death, too.

As long as sinners remain, the division Jesus brings will be apparent. This is an important truth to accept, because many will argue that division is proof that Jesus isn't there. Many will argue that peace and quiet is the proof of God's presence. Look at the Old Testament lesson, the time of Jeremiah. God complains about the false prophets whom He hasn't sent, but who claim to have gone out in His name. And what do the false prophets proclaim? They proclaim that "all is well" when it is not, that "no disaster will come upon you" when disaster is going to destroy the city. They proclaim "peace, peace" where there is no peace (cf. Jer 6:14). This is the very sort of peace that Jesus comes to destroy, because it's a false peace that denies the need for grace. So it's left to Jeremiah to be the skunk at the tea party, to declare that the sin of the people has divided them from God, that judgment it about to fall with a heavy hand. Now, who does everybody blame for causing division? Jeremiah, for telling the truth. But while he received the blame of man then, he now rests from his labors in heaven.

Do not try to measure the presence of Jesus by how much peace you feel. You know Jesus is present in His Word and Sacraments, no matter the storms around. We do well to remember Luther's observation that a superficial peace may mean that people have departed from the faith so far that the devil sees no need to trouble them anymore. Instead, give thanks that, no matter the storm, you know that for Jesus' sake you're not going to drown.

There are two places where this division becomes especially acute and painful. Jesus mentions one explicitly in our text: it is within families where some believe in Christ and some do not. This division may manifest itself in a subtle tension when some leave for church on Sunday and some do not, or an underlying worry for the souls of those who don't believe; or it may be open warfare when a non-Christian makes moral choices that flatly contradict Scripture. This is a difficult cross for believers to bear, and the temptation will be heavy upon you to blame Jesus for the division, to decide that your loyalty to family is more important than your faith in Christ. If you are in this position, you are in my prayers: and I pray that you would be delivered from the temptation of blaming the Lord. And I give thanks to God that He has divided you to life so that you might His instrument in your own home and among close friends, that you might with love and patience speak His saving Word to them. There may be distress, but God will grant you the grace and faith to be His blessed instrument there.

The other place is within the family of the Church. The "problem" with the Church, of course, is that it is full of sinners; and where you've got a group of sinners gathered around the holy things of God, divisions are bound to develop along the way. I'm thankful that, at present, we have no great divisions within this congregation—it doesn't mean that we've strayed from the Gospel, but rather that the devil's attacks at present are of a far more personal nature on different members in order to harm the body of Christ here. So when trouble arises, we first want to ask the question: is the disagreement over doctrine or over some other, debatable matter? If it is over a matter of Christian freedom, then we respond by making sure that the strong in faith care for the weak. None of us is to try to get his way, but to look out for everybody else. This love for one another goes a long way in preventing people from being divided from the flock. And where it is a matter of clear, biblical doctrine, we firmly hold fast to it without compromise. We do so because we do not want to be divided from God for the sake of a manmade peace. We want to remain divided from death and united in Christ.

Because Jesus comes to give division. He divides you from death to life, from sin to holiness. The word "sanctify" means "to set apart," to divide away from that which is common or unholy. By His grace, He has set you apart from sin to righteousness, from death to life, from grave to heaven, from "enslaved to the devil" to "child of God." He has done so by enduring the cross, that baptism of fire which damned Him so that you might be purified for His sake.

Blessed are you! For Jesus has come to divide you from death, and He does so with these words: you are forgiven for all of yours sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen